

## **BOONE COUNTY - SILENT SACRIFICES**

*Rural Albion couple know true meaning of the familiar phrase: God, family, and country.*

It happened three times.

Yet, despite the tragedies, Ken and Donna Iwan seem to stand stronger than ever.

The first was in 1970, when casualty liaison officers pulled up to the home of Donna's mother, signaling bad news from Vietnam.

Eighteen years later, a knock on the Iwan's front door in the early morning hours by their parish priest was met with the report of "hard news" about their young son.

Then, on a November day in 2004, the sight of liaison officers once again – much like those who had brought the news to Donna's mother 34 years ago.

But this time it would be news about her son.

The second of two sons that Ken and Donna would have to make funeral plans for. And the second of two sons these rural Albion parents are extremely proud of.

### **THE BEGINNING**

The story begins when Donna Iwan, known as Donna Dugan then, a spirited young Irish girl full of sprightly dreams, was engaged to a hard-working Polish farmer who had a gentle demeanor interlaced with youthful tease.

The wedding was only months away and Donna was eager for her brother, Ed Dugan, to come home from his infantry duties in Vietnam as well as another brother, Dan Dugan, serving with the military police in the Korean DMZ zone. She wanted them to be at her wedding.

Ed, a helicopter door-gunner, had only ten days left before his discharge when he volunteered to go into Cambodia.

James Martin Davis, then a ground soldier during that Cambodian invasion and now an Omaha lawyer, remembers how the battle sparked heavy fighting: As the fire intensified, a light observation helicopter could be seen circling overhead. At the sight of the helicopter, leaning out of its open door was a young door-gunner blazing away at the enemy, Davis recalled.

The chopper made numerous runs and the enemy fire subsided. As it swooped low over Davis's position, he recalls the "door-gunner with a big grin" giving them the peace sign and the chopper disappearing over the hill to engage in further combat.

It wasn't until Davis read the unit newspaper did he learn the gunner was Ed Dugan. Davis also discovered that a large enemy force, ready to overrun the unit he was in, was on the other side of the hill – danger the unit had no idea they were in. Because of Dugan's actions and his suppressive fire, the enemy's attack was disrupted.

Davis also learned that this "door-gunner supreme," as he called him, had later given his life for his fellow soldiers. The helicopter Ed was in had come under heavy ground fire. He had been shot, and the helicopter exploded.

Edward M. Dugan, 20, was killed in action on June 3, 1970. It was the last week he was to be in Vietnam.

## **THE TENTH OF JUNE**

Donna's mother and five siblings all happened to be home when the news arrived on that Saturday morning.

"Mom's house was a split level. You looked out on the street, and a car pulled up and two soldiers walked up to the house," Donna recalls clearly. "Mom, being of the generation she was, just sat down and said, 'Oh my God'."

Donna's father had died several years earlier on Memorial Day, and there were still younger siblings to help take care of.

"Each of us were assigned kids to take care of when we were little and Mike was Ed's kid to take care of. So when (the officer) finished telling us what happened, he said, 'I have to inform Michael B. Dugan also,' and Mom said, 'That's the little boy that ran into the other room crying.' Michael was 12."

Ed had been scheduled to come home on June 10. Instead, he was buried on that same date at the O'Connor country cemetery near his hometown of Greeley.

Donna and Ken were to be married in October, and their once joyous wedding plans didn't seem to matter too much anymore.

"We were waiting to be married when he got home. After this happened, I wanted just immediate family at the wedding," Donna remembers. "My Aunt Mac said, 'No, you're going to need something happy,' and she was probably right."

## **IRISH ORNERINESS AND POLISH PRANKS**

The wedding went on as planned and was a happy event. What the couple wanted next was a family to complete their life together.

"When we got married, I wanted eight children but I'm not very good at counting I guess," Donna laughed at the fact of their four children.

The couple's traditional values shaped the lives of the Iwan children into those of hard-working, dedicated leaders. That, meshed together with what Donna humorously calls "a mixture of Irish orneriness and Polish pranks," made them a close-knit, fun-loving family.

It was in this typical caring atmosphere on the night of November 20, 1988, that Matthew Iwan, a senior at Albion High School, left for a Saturday night with friends.

"Matt went out the door happy," his mother softly recalls. "The last thing I said to him when he went out the door was, 'take care of you for me because we need you' ... and I'd never said that to him before."

It was earlier in the week that Matt also said good-bye to his grandmother. "He hugged her when he left the house. Then he got out of the car and went back and hugged her again. (His grandmother) said with a 17-year-old that doesn't usually happen, but if you look back there's usually some reason."

There was a reason.

Matt was only a mile from home that Saturday night when he apparently fell asleep at the wheel of his 1979 Ford Thunderbird and ran off the road into a ditch, striking a metal culvert and embankment.

It was in the early morning hours when Matt's sister, Ginger, was having her birthday slumber party, that the family's parish priest knocked on the door, facing these parents with the announcement that he had "some hard news": Matt was pronounced dead upon arrival at the hospital.

The list of Matt's school and volunteer activities filled four long paragraphs in his obituary.

Classmate Megan Williams of Albion reminisced about his "incredibly contagious smile," and how he "went through great lengths to make other people's lives better."

"When he delivered Meals on Wheels to older people around Albion, he never ignored them as many of us are tempted to. He could talk for hours, and frequently did," Megan added.

Matt also worked as a carryout boy at a grocery store in Albion. His mother says of his last day at work: "The day he died he had been charming the socks off all the little old ladies, as usual."

## **ED IWAN:**

### **SON AND SOLDIER**

Ken and Donna's second son, Ed, named after his uncle killed in Vietnam, was in the seventh grade when his older brother was killed.

"(Both boys) were very busy," Donna said. "Ed liked hunting and animals. That's what he remembers of his older brother, that they couldn't hunt and fish together anymore.

"I picked Ed for a veterinarian because he'd have wild farm cats and he would be working on a car, and a cat would be on his shoulders," his mother grins.

"He was an avid gun collector, too. He took meticulous care of them and he understood the mechanics ... it all worked in the circle.

"Ed went into the Army because he said, 'I don't know what career to study. If I go to college I'll just get into trouble'."

Ed joined the Army following graduation from Albion High School in 1994. Three years later he returned to attend the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to become an officer.

After graduating, Ed returned to the Army and was commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant. Prior to his commission, he served as a wheeled vehicle repair specialist, a challenge he loved. "He was an infantry officer, but he was always in the motor pool checking up on things," Donna said.

On November 12, 2004, Fallujah was one of those places when a rocket-propelled grenade struck Ed's Bradley fighting vehicle. 1st Lt. Edward D. Iwan, 28, was wounded and died about an hour later.

Ed made sure his men were covered. He was the last man out, said a comrade.

It wasn't surprising. This 6' 4" red-headed soldier who liked to call his mother, 'little momma,' often told his parents, "These are my boys. I'm 24/7, we're family. My doors are always open."

"He wanted to be an officer, and he had everything done to be a captain but there wasn't an opening, so the minute he passed away, which they often do, they post-humously promoted him."

## **NEWS ARRIVES**

Donna was working at the post office in Albion when the call came in to her postmaster from the liaison officers, asking her to give Donna the message to meet them at the Catholic Church.

"I always wondered if they would come walking up the steps (of the post office)," she reflected. "We had just done a holiday shipment of packages and there was one for Ed. As I went out the door I told her, 'we may need to pull that package'." "that package'."

The Iwans had planned that morning to go couch shopping in Norfolk and were to meet at the church after work so Donna could change her clothes and meet Ken there.

Instead, Donna arrived at 3 p.m. to meet two liaison officers; however, they were unable to contact Ken as he usually keeps his cell phone off, using it only for convenience."

"And he was late," Donna said. "He didn't show up until 6 o'clock. He drove up and I asked if I could have a minute to tell him."

The couple had to wait another hour before Ed's sisters – Ginger Iwan and Katherine Boer, both of Omaha – were able to be contacted

Ten days after Ed's death, the streets of Albion were lined with mourners holding flags while the church spilled over with people. "The basement of the church was filled," Donna said. "And the courthouse employees watched on video at the Lutheran church."

Donna looked back at the irony of the dates revolving around their two son's deaths: "Matt's accident happened close to home. We go by it every day. It was the week before Thanksgiving. Matt was buried on November 22."

Ed was also buried on November 22 – 15 years later.

"We got to touch our boy. We knew he was here. That was more than (my mother) got," Donna reflected on her brother's closed-casket service. "The two brothers are buried in Albion, side-by-side. They offer you the option of burial in Arlington. Later we learned when you are scheduled in Arlington, you only get 25 minutes or so. I thought, 'That wouldn't have worked for the long winded Irishman. No way!'" Donna broke out in laughter.

One of Ed's friends later told the Iwan family that Ed was so devoted to his men that they would go anywhere for him and do anything for him. They also learned their son had a hand in designing the unit coin design in every unit he had been in.

## **THE CLASS RING**

Among Ed Iwan's possessions shipped back from Germany were his many commendations and awards and the class ring that belonged to his uncle who had been killed in Vietnam.

"Edward Iwan had Edward Dugan's class ring and picture. He treasured it. He never bought (a ring) for himself."

Donna has worn her Gold Star ring on her brother's birth month and death month every year since he died. "Other times, too, but for sure then," Donna added. "I was wearing it the day (the officers) called. That was November. There was no need for me to be wearing it. We'd been to the Veterans' Day service the day before and I was still wearing it."

This couple continually compliment the military for the courteous and thoughtful manner in which they were treated: "In the days we waited for Ed to be brought home, casualty liaison officer Captain Jan Behn was kind, gentle, efficient and constantly in touch.

"During estate snags – which military and civilian affairs are famous for – recently discharged JAG attorney Tom Fehringer was efficient and thorough. He made the Army rules easier for us to understand.

"The burial stipend you are promised in 10 to 14 days came January 12 – 90 days later. Our worries turned to young widows and families more in need than us with each other to lean on. We hoped this delay was a rare fluke."

### **VOLUNTEERING FOR VETS**

As for the news they hear about the military and their families sometimes being treated unfairly, Donna commented: "Sadly, we have no experience with wounded recovery but our inquiries of older veterans, their families, and area medical providers say regionally there have been improvements in the last eight to ten years.

"Excellent support is given with prescription and car cost savings for vets. Transportation is provided to distant care when needed. The system presently is stretching to try to provide better emergency transportation and patient communication information, similar goals to every medical provider we know actually.

"Perhaps we locals need to check more on our veterans. Volunteer to drive them to appointments," the Iwans suggest. "Help them understand their meds. Care for them as they cared for others years ago. We are the government – it's as good as we make it.

"But we were fortunate, anything we wanted we had it."

### **A DANCE WITH LIGHTNING**

People who knew 1st Lt. Ed Iwan in the military said he could "grow a garden in the desert, in the middle of a war zone."

Such a tribute of strength and faith could be said of every member of the Iwan family, who had these words inscribed on their son and brother's headstone:

*Ed lived every moment.*

*He stood in the rain*

*heard the thunder*

*danced to the lightning*

*and believed in rainbows.*

And for all their sacrifice, these parents have only one request concerning the unselfish giving of their son: "Salute his memory by bringing a smile to someone's heart today."